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Salvation at the brink.

HV 2335 V



AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

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SALVATION AT THE BRINK

VAN
BY DEAN CLUTE

SOON after I became a guest of the people of New York as a patient in the City Hospital on Welfare Island, I learned that though the care and treatment which I received at the hands of the medical staff might cause my pathological difficulties to flourish rather than languish, there would never be any reasons for apprehension concerning my spiritual welfare so long as I remained in the institution. Indeed, from the moment of my arrival in the reception room, it seemed that the principal curiosities itching the minds of the clerks who gathered about my stretcher were not so much of a physiological as of a theological nature.

"Are you a Catholic?" one of them asked, as she bent over my litter.

"No," I replied.

"A Protestant, then, of course?"

"No."

I became aware that the inquisitive lady was scrutinizing my face very carefully. The tap of her pen indicated that she was just a bit nervous and impatient.

"Well," she said, finally, "you're not a Jew. What *is* your religion?"

"I don't happen to have any," I had to admit.

"You must be *something*," she insisted. "I'll put you down as a Protestant."

Thus, my soul was classified before my body was examined.

Moved into the ward, a red card was placed in a conspicuous spot at the foot of my bed, indicating, as I later learned, that I was a Protestant. The color, I suppose, signified that I had, at some time or another, been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.

The beds of my Catholic neighbors were adorned with white cards, while those of my Jewish friends were decorated with tags of blue. The purpose and convenience of these colors became obvious in due time. By means of them the chaplains, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant, are able to tell at a glance as they enter the ward just where the harvest lies and how the spoils are to be divided. They save the poor pastors the embarrassment of finding themselves innocently engaged in lavishing their sorceries upon some dogged disciple of a hostile creed.

The morning after my arrival a low, necromantic voice boomed at the side of my bed. "Good morning," it said, "I am the Protestant chaplain. Is there anything I can do for you?" Such a generous inquiry comes too rarely, I thought, to afford being ignored. Besides, I wanted very much to acquaint a friend of mine in the city of my sudden change of address. I suggested that the chaplain might telephone him. "Well," he replied with his death-like voice, "I'm afraid I can't do that. You see, that's the function of the Social Service." Then, with some embarrassment, he announced that there were meetings in the chapel every Wednesday night in addition to the regular Sunday services. With a "hope I'll see you there" he went on to the next red card.

But it was easy to understand, after I had been in hospital a little longer, the chaplain's reluctance to devote himself unstintingly to the service of the patients, for I learned that his life was a hard one. He can take up no collections at his meetings, and his salary is pathetically small.

There are never any marriage fees to help him line his pockets. And whenever he escorts the soul of a moribund patient over the threshold to Paradise his remuneration for the job is paid only in the currency of the spiritual realm. While his classmates in the divinity school provide themselves with the fat of the land, he is engaged in hauling bankrupt prisoners in the state's calaboose back to the path of salvation, or teaching feeble-minded children the secrets of the Holy Trinity. In brief, he misses most of the rewards which in this modern day usually fall to his sacred office.

But what the chaplain thus lacks in business opportunities his amicable assistant makes up for. A man of immense proportions and a heavy voice, he dominates the Amen corner at the chapel services, functions as the sexton, and holds down a job as librarian of the Protestant collection of dusty books and time-seasoned magazines. His versatility does not end there, however. He is also the hospital's newsboy and does a good business, managing to get a penny more for his papers—with an additional nickel on Sunday—than the regular street-merchants, who are prohibited from coming on the Island. He is a great hand-shaker among the patients and a jolly fellow with the nurses. But if in his service for the Lord his actions sometimes take on a worldly aspect, he makes up for it by his zeal in ringing the bell for the chapel services, for in the performance of that pious office he never fails to convince everyone within earshot of the infirmary that a fire has broken out. Thus, following his chief he helps to spread the true faith.

An odor of sanctity hangs heavy about the whole hospital, and the business of saving and preserving souls is carried on in a very efficient manner. One large room is dedicated to it exclusively. It has all the appurtenances of a *bona fide* chapel. At one end there is a Catholic altar; at the other a Protestant chancel. Separate doorways aid in keeping the illusion of exclusiveness. The benches are reversible after the manner of street-car seats. Whether or not God

turns about politely to accommodate the diverse beliefs of the chapel's communicants, I have never been able to learn, but I am told that the resident priest and minister do a pretty good business.

"Now don't you go spitting around the Protestant doorway," said the priest one morning during Mass. "If you do they'll be callin' you dirty Irish."

II

Religion of a somewhat substantial quality visits the hospital every Tuesday afternoon, for on that day several ladies from the Bible and Fruit Mission come around the wards to distribute oranges and buns. Fluttering here and there among the beds which display red tags they inquire: "Which will you have, an orange or a bun?" Upon one occasion an old fellow, provoked either by greed or a humor to embarrass, answered, "Both." "Can't give you both," the angel of charity snapped very curtly. "Then I'll take a bun," the old fellow decided. "It sounds better."

Lest the beneficiaries forget the ways of salvation in an orgy of indulgence the society has provided reminders. With each orange or bun the missionaries hand out a tract which tells how a soul was saved or a miracle performed. Being members of a Protestant society, they are strictly requested by the resident priest not to give any of their gifts to the Catholics. But in the middle of the afternoon, with many of the patients up and about the ward in wheel-chairs, on crutches, or with the support of their shaky appendages, it is very difficult to distinguish the sheep from the goats. So the ladies have to ask any patient whose position makes it impossible to tell whether he belongs to one bed or another, if he is a Protestant. If he says no, then the gift has to be withheld. The results of this discrimination are adroitly overcome by those disciples of St. Peter who have been in the hospital more than a week. Every Tuesday afternoon finds these initiates conspicuously

absent from the vicinity of their tell-tale cards. And if they are asked concerning their faith they find it simple to become a Protestant for just a few seconds; while the ladies, in the frenzy of their good deeds, never think to question a Christian any further.

The sisters of the Catholic faith also are frequent visitors at the hospital. They inquire about the physical and spiritual welfare of the Romanists. One day one of them, misled no doubt by the perpetual smile of credulity that decorates my face and the absence of any revelatory card on my wheel-chair, approached me, bursting with beatific appreciation. "Your smile tells me," she exclaimed, "that you have the spirit of the blessed Jesus." Of course, I had to plead not guilty. Whereupon she became so distressed at my degradation that she had to retire from the ward.

Her brother in the service of Holy Church is not so easily undone. Downright flippancy in the face of the performance of his holy duties may ruffle him a little, but he sticks doggedly to his task despite all obstacles. One night, having been called at a late hour to administer the last rites to a patient of the Faith, he was sitting by the bedside of the dying man, mumbling the prayers in a tone which, though not very loud, could be heard all over the otherwise silent ward. A nearby patient, awakened by the sound, was finally provoked to complain. "How in hell do they expect anyone to sleep with all this noise!" he exclaimed with exasperation. The inexorable priest interrupted his prayers. Turning to the irreverent fault-finder, he said with considerable gusto: "You shut up! This is no time for any remarks of that nature. I'm trying to save this man from Purgatory."

The various duties of the reverend father seem, on many occasions, to require the most outlandish hours for their observance. At three o'clock one Christmas morning he came around the ward, ringing a bell. When he had succeeded in awakening nearly everybody, he went to the Catholic

patients, administering wafers of the Holy Sacrament—to the accompaniment of more indistinguishable mumbling. One fellow, slow in awakening, presently sat up, rubbed his eyes, and tried to discern what was going on. At length he burst forth stentoriously: "This is a hell of a time to be handing out candy!" But the chaplain was not daunted. Further down the ward another tardy arrival from the arms of Morpheus observed the approach of the priest with lustful anticipation. "I'm next," he shouted as the procession reached his bed.

"Do you want the Holy Sacrament?" the father asked solemnly.

The patient stared with surprise.

"Hell, no!" he finally blurted out. "I thought you had something to eat."

Instigated by the inspired authorities, still another surprise took place one Christmas morning. This one occurred at five o'clock. The invalids were aroused from their slumbers by the sound of singing and the noise of tramping footsteps along the corridors. Suddenly a parade of nurses, resplendent in their white uniforms and carrying candles (the hospital furnished them!) entered the ward, and marched slowly past the beds, singing carols. As the procession was leaving, an Irishman near the door was moved to articulation by the wonder of it all. "Oh, see the pretty angels!" he exclaimed with reverential approval. One of the saintly choir, whose position at the end of the line gave her words somewhat the aspect of finality, turned and hurled at him, "Say, old boy, you don't know the half of it!"

In the performance of many of his tasks about the hospital the Catholic chaplain, like his Protestant brother, is aided by a versatile assistant. The present incumbent of that high office came to the hospital eight years ago as a patient. Now, by the grace of God, he is a self-respecting flunkey of the church, with powers that are almost plenary. He, also, like his Protestant equivalent, is curator of the museum of books which is maintained by philan-

thropic members of his faith. He functions also as altar boy, swings the censer, reverses the chapel seats, and hands out the prayer-books. In the sanctuary of his library which, though maintained for the use of the patients, is virtually inviolable except for his uses, he entertains the doctors, the nurses, and the Island police. There he holds forth grandly, giving his guests concerts over the radio, smoking his cigar, regaling his company with stories of his operations in the stock market, and reflecting upon the marvellous fruits of the religious life.

III

The resident ecclesiastics are assisted in their efforts to keep the Devil out of the hospital by a pious and tenacious religionist who spends his worldly hours superintending a large office building in the Wall street district. Sixty years old, this lay votary of evangelism has been coming over to the hospital on Thursday evenings to hold mission meetings for the last thirty-four years. Before the Queensborough bridge was built he used to row across the river, and he has missed only two Thursday evenings since he started his mission.

He frequently puts on a show which keeps his congregation pop-eyed. On one occasion he brought over Jack Carroll, an ex-safecracker; Mike Hickey, a former pickpocket; Pat Crowe, a quondam train robber; and a vaudeville actor who had once been a bum. With them he put on a gala performance for the thrill-hungry patients. The place was crowded and the first part of the evening was a huge success. The adventurers told their stories. The vaudevillian was the last on the programme. He related the disaster that followed the taking of his first drink of liquor—related it with all the hearts-and-flowers technique which his years on the stage had given him. He told of his shameful descent to the ranks of the Bowery bums. "One night," he cried, in a voice choking with emotion, "I was completely

down and out, and had to sleep in a church grave-yard. . . . I was hungry and ragged. . . . I had not eaten all day. . . . An odor of beans came to me from the kitchen of a mission across the street. . . . A girl's voice started singing a hymn. . . . Oh, but it sounded so sweet. . . . I thought of my childhood days and the religion my mother had taught me, and I finally said to myself, 'My boy, if Jesus Christ can save you now, you're going to be saved.' . . . I got up, dragged myself over to the mission doorway and started to enter. . . . The servants of Christ came and helped me in. They gave me a plate of beans and prayed for my soul. . . . Suddenly a glorious feeling of satisfaction and comfort came over my body, and I knew that I had been saved. . . . I realized then that, after all, the road of religion is the Easiest Way."

When he had finished his story there came the inevitable mention of the blood of the Lamb, redemption, and salvation. Finally he asked for volunteers to give their hearts to Christ. The evangelist sat smugly on the platform contemplating the huge receipts in souls he was bound to bring in. A voice from the back of the hall broke the silence. "Hallelujah, give us a handout!" it sang out derisively. The irreverent heckler was asked to leave. Later I discovered that he had been a former cell-mate of the vaudevillian at the penitentiary next door—in the days, of course, before the vaudevillian had discovered that religion was the Easiest Way, and when they had both appreciated the substantial merits of missions with kitchens attached.

At all of these Thursday night meetings a Puritan-looking lady is on hand to play the piano. Her favorite claim to distinction resides in the fact that she sang the hymn which brought the vaudevillian to the door of the Bowery mission and thus to his salvation.

Girls from the G. U. ward were once allowed to attend the sorceries of the evangelical workers but they were not always a tractable congregation. Indeed, one evening they started to carry on with the young

fellows who sat on the opposite side of the room. They passed notes across the aisle, and even winked and giggled at the invalid Lotharios. At length, their devotion to pursuits other than theological became so distracting to the poor evangelist that he had to ask them to leave the hall. There was a shuffling and stamping of feet as they filed out. One impious hussy hung back toward the end of the line and, just as she went out the door, shouted back over her shoulder: "Aw, go to hell!" From then on a corps of women were assigned to watch over the girls at their evangelical devotions. But the G. U. ladies continued to be unmanageable, so they were finally prohibited from attending the meetings. Whereupon, and much to the consternation of the devout leader, the attendance of the young men fell off most lamentably.

IV

Despite the heroic struggles of the clergy a disillusioned soul occasionally slips from their clutches into the hands of the Devil. In fact, they can never be sure of even their devoutest followers. The career of one soul, his temptation, indulgence, and final fall, interested me particularly.

His name was John Francis. He came to the hospital ostensibly suffering from stomach trouble, but his real difficulty was neurasthenia. He was afraid that he was going to die, afraid of living, and dreaded to think of what was going to happen to him. They treated him for nervousness. Physically capable, he was assigned to take care of me and thus we became quite chummy. He was content to wheel me out into the hospital yard, sit by my chair all day, light my pipe, and listen to me talk whenever I felt so disposed. I sensed him as a meek, sensitive, broken-spirited creature whom life had defeated—and at the age of thirty-eight.

I decided that I might use him to read to me, inasmuch as he seemed contented in my company. I started him off on Dreiser's "An American Tragedy," the length of

which had frightened my other readers. At first it was pretty hard and slow going: the number of words which he neither knew the meaning of nor how to pronounce was rather appalling. But as we progressed he became interested and before we were through he was weeping at many of the difficulties of the chief character.

These episodes brought me to suspect that John had some rather fine sensibilities, after all. I began to draw him out concerning his life. I learned that he had come from Portugal at the age of eight to live with an aunt in California. After two years of public school he had been put to work in a fish cannery. Whenever he was caught reading, his aunt would box his ears and say: "What do you mean, trying to play the gentleman? It is work for you, and not books." He had known nothing but work ever since. He went to Mass regularly, read the tabloid newspapers and the adventure magazines—and worried about what was going to happen to him.

In the relation of his story he revealed a very deep emotionalism and an equally pious nature. As much for the purpose of observing his reactions as to fill in some of the gaps in my own reading which had been caused by my blindness, I set him to reading some of H. G. Wells' volumes to me. The operation was decidedly painful to him but it turned out successfully. Before we had finished reading "Men Like Gods," John was seriously questioning his faith and nearly ready to forgive the obscenity of "people running around naked." My interest in him developed. His improvement was steady, but he still had a loathing to go out into the cruel world again. The upshot of this difficulty was that he took a job at the hospital and continued to spend his spare time reading to me and wheeling me around. When he got his first pay from the infirmary he went over town to buy "some of those books" about which I had been talking to him. He came back with Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," a copy of Keats, Harry Kemp's "Tramping On Life," and a pocket-

dictionary. I nearly fell out of my wheelchair from surprise.

Before long he had developed a great weakness for reading poetry. Thinking to season this idealistic trend of his with some alluring brand of materialism, I introduced him to Upton Sinclair. I paid dearly for that inspiration. My erstwhile peace-loving protégé became a flaming fire-brand. He harangued me from morning to night about plutocrats, bourgeoisie, struggling masses, scoundrels of religion, and the prostitute press. For over two years he floated among the bizarre chimeras of American Socialism and would read nothing, willingly, which did not whoop it up for the cause. At length, however, he came closer to earth and stuck his nose into the pages of Rabelais and Anatole France. Now he walks about like a normal person and is even contemplating assaulting the

citadels of commerce and capturing a job as salesman. He snickers a little now and then as the priest walks by. And the doctors contemplate his cure with thumbs behind their galluses and a considerable swelling of chests.

The majority of patients, of course, have none of the potentialities of John Francis. Thinking to them is as impossible as the realization of their wildest dreams. Addicted to religion, as is the case with most ignorant people, they deny themselves many pleasures for the sake of strengthening their chances of getting into Heaven, and then spend many hours of terrifying speculation as to their possibilities of escaping Hell. Thus, in the mass, there is as much work at City Hospital for the spiritual gentlemen of the cloth as there is for their scientific colleagues with the white aprons.

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Syracuse, N. Y.

PAT. JAN 21, 1908

